

ARTICLES

THREE MODERN TAIWANESE POETESSES (RONGZI, XIA YU AND SIREN) ON THREE WISDOM BOOKS OF THE *BIBLE**

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The aim of this article is to point out the impact of the wisdom books of the *Bible* on three modern Taiwanese women poets and their different response against the background of the Chinese religious and philosophical tradition, their personal upbringing, ideological position and their poetic nature.

In the second half of the 1980s more attention began to be paid to the reception and survival of the biblical literature among the foreign Sinologists and Chinese scholars. Especially the modern Chinese fiction of the post-May Fourth 1919 era and of Taiwan was studied at first,¹ followed by the PRC literature of the post-“Cultural Revolution” time in the 1990s.² To a much smaller extent, the drama and poetry started to attract the consideration of the scholars.³

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¹ ROBINSON, L.S.: *Double-Edged Sword. Christianity & 20th Century Chinese Fiction*. Hong Kong, Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre 1986.

² GÁLIK, M.: *Mythopoetische Vision von Golgatha und Apokalypse bei Wang Meng*. *Minima sinica* (Bonn), 2, 1991, pp. 52–82 and its English version *Wang Meng's Mythopoeic Vision of Golgotha and Apocalypse*. *Annali* (Istituto Universitario Orientale, Napoli), 52, 1992, 1, pp. 61–82. See also his *Parody and Absurd Laughter in Wang Meng's Apocalypse. Musings Over the Metamorphosis of the Biblical Vision in Contemporary Chinese Literature*. In: SCHMIDT-GLINTZER, H. (ed.): *Das andere China. Festschrift für Wolfgang Bauer zum 65. Geburtstag*. Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag 1995, pp. 449–461 and *Gu Cheng's Novel Ying'er and the Bible*, *Asian and African Studies* (Bratislava), 5, 1996, 1, pp. 83–97.

As to the poetry, as far as I know, not much had been done, except for Bing Xin [4] (1900–), and a few remarks concerned with Rongzi [5] and Siren [6].⁴ The most influential book in world literature made its way into the Chinese world and became quite a decisive element in shaping the consciousness of a part of the Chinese intelligentsia, and we see its influence quite clearly. It is interesting, and even surprising, to see the impact of the biblical message against the background created by the prolonged effectiveness of Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and the indigenous Chinese literature, mythological and other ideas.

1

Bing Xin, with real name Xie Wanying [17], was the first Chinese woman poet, who after reading of the first chapter of *Genesis* and especially after pondering over the *Psalm 19* by King David (reigned approximately 1000–961 or 965 B.C.) wrote her two well-known volumes of poetry: *Fanxing* [18] *A Maze of Stars* and *Chunshui* [18] *Spring Waters*. We know that she was entranced by the words:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. *There is* no speech nor language, *where* their voice is not heard. Their line is gone through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.

Bing Xin's *opus* at the beginning of the 1920s, by using very plain words, expresses the greatness of God's creation represented by Milky Way and the universe of myriad stars.

Bing Xin found her best student and follower in Rongzi (Yung-tzu) (1928–). Rongzi's real name is Katherine Wang Rongzhi [20]. She was born on May 4,⁵ exactly nine years after the May Fourth Movement, the starting point of modern

³ SONG JIANHUA [1]: *Kunhuo yu qiusuo* [2] Vexed Desires and Importunate Demands. Peiking, Guangbo xueyuan chubanshe [3] Broadcasting Institute Publishers 1992 and partly also YEH, M.: *The "Cult of Poetry" in Contemporary China*. The Journal of Asian Studies, 55, 1996, 1, pp. 51–62.

⁴ GÁLIK, M.: *Studies in Modern Chinese Intellectual History: VI. Young Bing Xin (1919–1923)*. Asian and African Studies, 2, 1993, 1, pp. 41–60, ZHOU BONAI [7]: *Qian lun Rongzi de shi* [8] A Few Remarks on Rongzi's Poetry. In: XIAO XIAO [9] (ed.): *Yongyuan de qingniao. Rongzi shizuo pinglunji* [10] Eternal Blue Bird. Critical Essays on Rongzi's Poetry and Other Works. Taipei, Wenshizhe chubanshe [11] Literature, History and Philosophy Publishers 1995, pp. 24–25, LIN YAODE [12]: *Wo du de Rongzi* [13] My Reading of Rongzi, *ibid.*, pp. 52–53 and YU GUANGZHONG (YŪ KUANG-CHUNG) [14]: *Bu xin jiu hun jiao bu ying* [15] If You Don't Trust Nine Doorkeepers, You Will Not Get Response. In: SIREN: *Qianwei huashi* [16] The Rose Chronicles, Taipei, Bookman Books Ltd. 1995, pp. 25–26.

⁵ For Rongzi's life and work, see the chronology in XIAO XIAO: *op. cit.*, pp. 554–577.

Chinese literature, in a small place called Jiguan, Chiangsu Prov. Her father was a Presbyterian minister. Since her childhood Rongzi read passages from the *Bible* every day as a part of her evening prayers. When reading the different biblical books she often underlined for herself the weighty or impressive passages.

During my stay in Taipei, Rongzi kindly allowed me to make photocopies of her “personal” *Bible* entitled: *Jiu xin yue quanshu* [21] *The Old and New Testament of the Bible*, “Shangti”, ed. 2154, The Bible Societies in Hong Kong & Taiwan 1964. Now I am able to follow her readings and study passages she underlined during the last more than thirty years. I observed very quickly that most her underlinings can be found in the *Psalms*, nearly half of which are ascribed to King David, where we may find the connecting line between Rongzi and Bing Xin. After having in mind, what has been said up to now, it is not strange, that the first underlined verse in Rongzi’s personal *Bible* was *Genesis*, 1, 14:

And God said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years.

From the lines of the *Psalm 19* Rongzi did not follow Bing Xin fully, but stressed the last line of King David’s poem:

Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart, be acceptable in thy sight, O LORD my strength, my redeemer.

From here we may deduce Rongzi’s special use of biblical texts. For her the most important was the ethical, religious message of biblical poetry, pious and humble conversation with God, whether in poetic language or in prose. For her reading of the *Bible* was usually a substitute for prayer, a source of meditation. The books of the *Bible* are always a source of meditation, but it cannot be said that they contain only prayers as we shall see presently.

In the nineteen or more volumes of Rongzi’s books of poetry published so far,⁶ we do not find many poems which would be directly inspired by the texts of the *Bible*. She told me in the interview on January 3, 1996, that she seldom wrote religious poetry as such, although religious feelings and beliefs may be found in her secular and civil poetry. A few days after this interview she sent me a photocopy of the so-called *Zongjiao shi liu shou* [22] Six Religious Poems, from different already published volumes. As she told me on the phone, these were not all, since she did not even include the two poems which I would like to analyse in this contribution.

In spite of the fact that David’s *Psalms* were Rongzi’s most beloved biblical poetry, we do not find easily its direct traces in her works. She did not protest to my assertion concerning David’s impact on her during the discussion after my

⁶ Ibid., p. 552.

lecture on Bing Xin's poetry on December 22, 1995, in the National Central Library, Taipei, and she also acknowledged it openly.

It was not the works of King David, probably the greatest poet among the ancient Hebrews, but one of the books traditionally attributed to his son King Solomon (reigned approximately 961–922 or 965–931 B.C.), which helped to create two of Rongzi's small, but impressive poetic works. This book entitled *The Ecclesiastes, or The Preacher, or Qoheleth* in Hebrew, is certainly not the work of King Solomon. According to James G. Williams, the author's "style and outlook were probably influenced to some extent by the Hellenistic culture of the third century B.C.E. He was acquainted with a notion that resembles the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul (see 3:21), and his writing may have been affected by Greek literary forms, such as *parainesis* (exhortation). But all in all, it is best to see Ecclesiastes as a work composed of ancient Hebrew literary forms, which the author employs in both conventional and unconventional ways."⁷ According to another author, S. H. Blank, "no direct influence of Greek philosophers or philosophic systems – Stoics, Epicureans, Cynics, Cyrenaics – upon Ecclesiastes is demonstrable," although "a Socratic spirit of untrammelled inquiry and of autonomy of the human mind breathes through" this book, a spirit "as might well have been current in the mildly Hellenized Jerusalem of the century following the division of Alexander's empire."⁸ The state of things was probably more complex. The "wisdom literature" of the *Bible* to which *The Ecclesiastes* together with the *Book of Job* and partly also with *Song of Songs* belongs, was connected with by its umbilical cord with the Egyptian and Near Eastern wisdom literature. The Judaic filter was here most important. Around the third century B.C., in the time when *The Ecclesiastes* was written or at least edited as known to us, Hellenism as a very complex systemo-structural entity connecting together the elements of Greek, Egyptian and Near Eastern culture, also infused the world of the Hebrews "all areas of life: political, social, economic, technological, cultural, and religious."⁹ Against this background is interesting how one modern Chinese woman poet as an inheritor of classical Chinese religious, philosophical and literary values, looks at one of the most sophisticated books of Hebrew heritage.

I shall probably not bother my readers too much, if I quote verses of *The Ecclesiastes* one after another as they are underlined in Rongzi's copy of *the Bible* and later analyse them within the framework of her own understanding, the Chinese and Judeo-Christian tradition. In the case that Rongzi by her underlining stressed only a part of the verse, I shall point this out by bold script:

⁷ WILLIAMS, J.G.: *Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. In: ALTER, R. and KERMODE, F. (eds.): *The Literary Guide to the Bible*. Cambridge (Mass.). The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 1987, p. 277.

⁸ BLANK, S.H.: *Ecclesiastes*. In: *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. New York, Abingdon Press 1962, p. 9.

⁹ SIGAL, Ph.: *Judaism. The Evolution of a Faith*. Rev. and ed. by L. Sigal. Grand Rapids (Michigan), William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 1988, p. 44.

The thing that has been, it *is that* which shall be; and that which is done *is that* which shall be done: and *there is* no new *thing* under the sun (1, 9)

And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all *things* that are done under heaven: **this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith** (1, 13)

For in much wisdom *is* much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow (1, 18)

He hath made every *thing* beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, **so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end** (3, 11)

Yea, better *is he* than both they (i.e. the dead or living, M.G.), which hath not yet been, who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun (4, 3)

For a dream comes through the multitude of business, and a fool's voice *is known* by multitude of words (5, 3)

And this also *is* a sore evil, *that* in all points as he came, so shall he go, and **what profit hath he that hath laboured for the wind** (5, 16)

Behold that which I have seen: *it is* good and comely *for one* to eat and to drink, **and to enjoy the good of all his labour that he taketh under the sun all the days of his life**, which God -giveth him: for it *is* his portion (5, 18)

For who knoweth what *is* good for man in *this* life, all the days of his vain life which he spendeth as a shadow? for who can tell the man what shall be after him under the sun? (6, 12)

Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do *it* with thy might; for *there is* no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest (9, 10)

Dead flies cause the ointment of the apothecary to send forth a stinking savour: **so doth a little folly him that is in reputation and honour** (10, 1)

If the clouds be full of rain, they empty themselves upon the earth: and if the tree falls toward the south, or toward the north, in the place where the tree falleth, there it shall be (11, 3)

Now we shall proceed with the prosaic translation of Rongzi's two poems into English. The first entitled *Shijian de xuanlu* [23] *Cyclical Recurrence* was written in 1984.

Time has certain rhythm
time has certain recurrent law
– always appears and reappears
the sun ascends the sun declines
winter goes and spring comes...

“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be
and that which is done is that which shall be done
and there is no new thing under the sun”
O thus spake philosopher some thousand years ago.¹⁰

This philosopher allegedly was nobody else but King Solomon (it seems that Rongzi believed in this traditional assertion), famous for his wisdom, who allegedly had a conversation with God in his dream after ascending the throne of Israel and Judah, and prayed: “Give me now wisdom and knowledge that I may go out and come before this people, *that is so great.*” And Lord said to him: “Wisdom and knowledge *is* granted unto thee, and I shall give thee riches and wealth, and honour, such as none of the kings have had that *have been* before thee, neither there any after thee have the like.”¹¹

The second poem *Jin, xi* [25] *Of Old and Now* was written about twenty years earlier in the first half of the 1960s.

Every day is clear and bright
every day is to be availed of
this is the time of young years
under the light of the sun beyond the silky veil
under the sunny rays there are flowers
under the sunny rays there are many wonders
– endless beautiful overspreading melodies
this world is the Kingdom of Heaven, Kingdom of Heaven
every day is full of clouds and mist
every day is full of troubles and melancholy
when the flower disappear dreams fall into the hearts

and much work piles up in poor houses
under the sun there is only sore travail (*laoku*) [26]
and there is no new thing under the sun
– golden days transform into the grey moments
a peak of heavy burden¹²

The first poem shows clearly that *poematis persona*, probably Rongzi herself, was interested only in the verse 1, 9 of the *Ecclesiastes* and its cyclical understanding of time which was typical for the Hebrews of that time, as well as for the Greeks, especially Aristotelians (Peripatetics), and later Neo-Platonists,

¹⁰ *Qianquzhi sheng. Rongzi shizuo jingxuan* [24] *The Voice of a Thousand Tunes. The Best Poems by Rongzi.* Taipei, Literature, History and Philosophy Publishers 1995, p. 184.

¹¹ See *ibid.*, p. 185 and *Chronicles II, 1*, 10 and 12.

¹² *Rongzi zixuan ji* [27] *Rongzi's Self-selected Works.* Liming wenhua [28] Chinese Culture Publishers 1978, pp. 145–146.

and in China for the ancient Taoists. Joseph Needham wrote in his excellent treatise called *Time and Eastern Man*:

“Nothing could be more striking than the appreciation of cyclical change, the cycle-mindedness, of the Taoists.¹³ ‘Returning is the characteristic movement of the Tao (the order of Nature)’ say the *Tao Te Ching*. ‘Time’s typical virtue’, wrote Granet, ‘is to proceed by revolution.’ Indeed time (*shih*) [29] is itself generated, some thought, by this uncreated and spontaneous (*tzu-jan*) [30] never-ceasing circulation (*yün*) [31]. The whole of Nature (*thien*) [32], the Taoists felt, could be analogized with the life-cycles of living organisms. ‘A time to be born and a time to die,’ a time for the founding of a dynasty and a time for its suppression. This was the meaning of destiny (*ming*) [33], hence the expression *shih-yün* [34] and *shih-ming* [35]. The sage accepts; he knows not only how to come forward but also how to retire.”¹⁴ Most Chinese thinkers believed in the recurrence within time.¹⁵

The modern Taiwanese poetess accepted the teaching of the Preacher, although not *in toto*. Her Christian consciousness told her to care for her soul and she followed this call, as we shall see presently. Ecclesiastes is most sceptical among all contributors to the *Holy Scriptures*. God for its author “is somewhat withdrawn and not very communicative”, he is not only “remote and silent: he is inflexible”.¹⁶ This God is like a marble statue. Since the God of Ecclesiastes is not a “very communicative” entity, the discussion with him is more a kind of observation, self-reflection but not of prayer and meditation.

Derek Kidner, author of the book *Wisdom to Live By. An Introduction to the Old Testament’s Wisdom Books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes*, begins the Chapter 6 with the affirmation that the author of *The Ecclesiastes* had even more audacity before the face of God than that of *The Book of Job*. Here with “no Job-like prologue to let us into any secrets, no dialogue to balance one point of view against another, and no answering voice from heaven, we take the full force of the opening salvo, ‘Vanity of vanities...! All is vanity’, and finally receive it again as Quothelth’s parting shot (12:8). But while the word ‘vanity’ is heard more than thirty times in these twelve chapters, and finds echoes of its dark mood in such a cry as: “Who knows what is good for man?” (6:12) or, more desperately, ‘I thought the dead... more fortunate than the living’ – and the stillborn more fortunate than either (4:2–3; 6:3b–5), this is not the whole story.”¹⁷

Yes, that is true. It is not the whole story. Rongzi underlined, as we read above, the verse 4, 3 about the not yet born as more happy than those living or dead but she did not try to get even with the most important assertion of the

¹³ Cf. NEEDHAM, J.: *Time and Eastern Man*. In: *The Grand Titration. Science and Society in East and West*. London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd. 1969, pp. 224 and 286.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

¹⁶ BLANK, S.H.: *op. cit.*, p. 13.

¹⁷ Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press 1985, p. 90.

whole book: with “vanity of vanities” as the most basic characteristics of *conditio humana*, the world and God’s creation. Who knows whether she was aware of the original meaning of the Hebrew word *hebel* translated into English as “vanity”. As Rongzi read *The Ecclesiastes* in Chinese translation without commentaries, probably not. *Xukong* [36] in Chinese means hollow, empty, and the original Hebrew word, used also in the *Psalms* 39, is a “mere breath, a vapour, i.e. transience, emptiness, hence futility”,¹⁸ or “if everything is vapor, then the round of generations and the turnings of sun and wind and waters are but the recycling of a mist or a breath whose reality is this: it disappears.”¹⁹ When in a letter to Rongzi I expressed my astonishment that she did not take any view on this particular point, she answered on April 10, 1996, that the verses 1, 1–8, including “‘Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity’ is a very deep view of King Solomon’s wisdom into the basic substance of human world” and when underlining the other verses she “stood on the platform of a Christian.” Behind the futile phenomena of the human world there are hidden very important reasons for God’s redemption of mankind.

As a devout Christian, Rongzi escaped the challenge of the Buddhist, especially Mahayanist teaching of *sunyata*, i.e. *xukong*, as this word is translated into Rongzi’s *Bible*, and probably in other Chinese versions of the *Bible*, too. In Buddhist teachings, “all phenomena are transient and lacking in objective reality. They are the result of a process of cause and effect which leads to an endless succession of births and deaths for all those who continued to be deluded by desire, aversion and ignorance. Only by cultivating complete detachment from all objects of the six senses (including that of condition) can the chain of life and death be broken and Nirvana, the state wherein there is no birth, decay, death, sorrow or impurity attained,”²⁰ and the “impermanence leads naturally to the doctrine of the voidness of sensual phenomena”,²¹ although the various Buddhist teachings differ in their interpretations concerning the character and framework of this void. If we compare the short note by Kidner and more comprehensive explanation of Buddhist concept of voidness, we observe similar words but their connotation is different in Judeo-Christian and Buddhist understanding. If the comprehension and implementation of the claims put by the voidness is the target of Buddhist strains, in Judeo-Christian framework, the Hebrew *hebel* and Christian vanity is a consequence of the “sinful fall” or “original sin” by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

The second poem depicts Rongzi’s Christian vision of *hebel*, vanity or *xukong*. It has lost the Preacher’s scepticism, it is the world sometimes full of light, flowers, wonders, but also of clouds, mist, troubles and melancholy. The

¹⁸ Loc. cit.

¹⁹ WILLIAMS, J.G.: op. cit., p. 278.

²⁰ BLOFELD, J.: *The Jewel in the Lotus. An Outline of Present Buddhism in China*. London, Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd. 1948, p. 31.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

greyish (not explicitly) dark aspects prevail in the human world. In its second stanza, the second line “under the sun there is only sore travail”, is a slightly changed second part of the Ecclesiastes’ verse 1, 13, i.e. “this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith”, and the third line, “and there is no new thing under the sun”, is a quotation of the end of the verse 1, 9.

Derek Kidner was right that the “opening salvo” and all the echoes of its dark mood was not the whole story. There are really “enough crosscurrents of joy and of orthodox wisdom and piety.”²² In *The Ecclesiastes* we may read:

Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with merry heart; for God accepeth thy works... Live joyfully with thy wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity; for that *is* thy portion in *this* life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun (9, 7–9)

On the other hand we have to see that in some places *The Ecclesiastes* is not only sceptical, but also cynical, as we see in the verses 3, 18–19:

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all *is* vanity.

For Rongzi all the sceptical and cynical ideas were irrelevant. She understood this world as the Kingdom of Heaven in its Christian apprehension, as was revealed especially in the parables of Jesus Christ, as that of a “precious treasure hidden in a field”, or “a merchant man seeking goodly pearls”, or like “a net that was cast into the sea” (*St. Matthew, 14, 44–50*) with all its moral and other consequences. This world, with its good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and lie, with all “vanity of vanities” was given to us as a preparation for the future abode for those who are following the will of God (cf. *St. Matthew, 7, 211*).

2

Xia Yu [37] (1956–), the second Taiwanese poetesses under consideration, published three volumes of poetry so far,²³ and she is one of the most promising. Nothing, as far as I may judge, is known about her in the relation to Christianity

²² KIDNER, D.: op. cit., p. 90.

²³ These are as follows: *Beiwang lu* [38] Memoranda. Samizdat. Taipei 1984, *Fuyushu* [39] Ventriloquy. Taipei, Xiandaishi jikan [40] Modern Poetry Quarterly Publishers 1991 and *Moca. Wuyi mingzhuang* [41] Frictional. Undescribable. N.p., n.y. (1995?)

or the *Bible*. She is quite well-known and popular for her feminist attitudes. Michelle Yeh, probably the best expert on modern Chinese poetry in the West, dedicated one of her long essays to Xia Yu.²⁴ Her poetry was quite often studied by her Taiwanese compatriots.²⁵ At least in one case, the *Bible*, specifically the *Song of Songs*, was among many incentives for her provocative and expressive poetry. Xia Yu is very different from Rongzi. For Rongzi the poetry of the *Bible* is not only the work of human hearts, brains and hands, but was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as she told me during our conversation on Dec. 21, 1995 in her flat and in the presence of her husband Luomen [49] (1928–). For Xia Yu the *Song of Songs*, also traditionally attributed to Solomon, was very probably only a wonderful poetic text of ancient times with which it is necessary to cope in our postmodern age and with its feminist ideology. In our days it is much in vogue to do this in the form of parody.

Now it is necessary to proceed in this way as in the case of Rongzi. Since it is not known what passages of the *Song of Songs* made the deepest impression, or provoked her critical aversion, the best would be to quote the relevant passages which probably led Xia Yu to writing her short poem entitled *Wo suo qin-ai* [50] *My Love* from the year 1980.

The *Song of Songs* is composed from a group of love songs the number of which varies from one to another author. Since its eight chapters do not care about the proper division, we shall proceed according to one in many following *Stuttgarter Erklärungs-bibel*, Stuttgart, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1992, but with King James' version:

His left hand *is* under my head, and his right hand does embrace me.
 I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes, and by the
 hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake *my* love, till he please.
 The voice of my beloved! behold, he cometh leaping upon the moun-
 tains, skipping upon the hills.
 My beloved is like a roe or a young hart: behold, he standeth behind
 our wall, he looketh forth at the windows, shewing himself through the
 lattice.
 My beloved spake, and said unto me, Rise up, my love, my fair one,
 and come away.
 For, lo, the winter is past, the rain *is* over *and* gone.

²⁴ YEH, M.: *The Feminist Poetic of Xia Yu*. Modern Chinese Literature, 7, 1993, pp. 33–59.

²⁵ ZHONG LING (LING CHUNG) [42]: *Xia Yu de shidai jingshen* [43] Xia Yu and the Spirit of Time. Modern Poetry Quarterly, 13, 1988, pp. 7–11 and LIAO XIANHAO [44]: *Wushizhuyi de banbian. Cong wenxueshi, nuxinghua, houxiandai zhi mege kan Xia Yu de “yinxing shi”* [45] Betrayal of Materialism. From Literary History, Feminization and Postmodern Systems Look at Xia Yu's “Poetry of Dark Gender”. In: ZHENG MINGLI [46] (ed.): *Dangdai Taiwan nuxing wenxue lun* [47] Women and Contemporary Taiwanese Literature. Taipei, Shibao wenhua [48] The China Times Publishers 1993, pp. 236–272.

The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing *of birds* is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land;

The fig tree putteth forth her green figs, and the wines *with* the tender grape give a *good* smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.

O my dove, *that art* in the clefts of the rock, in the secret *places* of the stairs, let me see thy countenance, let me hear thy voice; for sweet *is* thy voice, and thy countenance *is* comely.

Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines *have* tender grapes.

My beloved *is* mine, and I *am* his: he feedeth among the lilies.

Until the day break, and the shadows flee away, turn, my beloved, and be thou like a roe or a young hart upon the mountains of Bether (2, 6–17).

The second sequence which Xia Yu might have in mind is the following:

...I found him whom my soul loveth; I held him, and I would not let him go, until I had brought him into my mother's house, and into the chamber of her that conceived me.

I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, by the roes and by the hinds of the field, that ye stir not up, nor awake *my* love, till he please.

Who *is* this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrh and frankincense, with all powders of merchant?

Behold his bed, which *is* Solomon's; threescore of valiant men *are* about it, of the valiant of Israel

They all hold swords, *being* experts in war: every man *hath* his sword upon his thigh because of fear in the night.

King Solomon made himself a chariot of the wood of Lebanon.

He made the pillars thereof *of* silver, the bottom thereof *of* gold, the covering of it *of* purple, the midst thereof being paved *with* love, for the daughters of Jerusalem.

Go forth, O ye daughters of Zion, and behold king Solomon with the crown wherewith his mother crowned him in the day of his espousals, and in the day of the gladness of his heart (3, 4–11).

The third sequence is certainly most philosophical and maybe Rabbi Akiba (50–135) had in mind precisely these verses when he affirmed that: "all the writings are holy, and the Song of Songs is the holy of holies".²⁶

His left hand *should be* under my head, and his right hand should embrace me.

²⁶ Quoted according to D.A.H.: *Song of Solomon. Song of Songs (Šir hašširim)*. In: DOUGLAS, J.D. (ed.): *The Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. Sydney and Auckland. Tyndale House Publishers 1980, p. 1472.

I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, that ye stir not up, nor awake *my* love, until he please.

Who *is* this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved? I raised thee up under the apple tree: there thy mother brought thee forth; there she brought thee forth *that* bare thee.

Set me as a seal upon thine heart, as a seal upon thine arm: for love *is* strong as death; jealousy *is* cruel as the grave: the coals thereof *are* coal of fire, *which hath* a most vehement flame.

Many waters cannot quench love, neither can the floods drown it: if a man would give all substance of his house for love, it would utterly be contemned (8, 3–7).

Here follows my prosaic translation of Xia Yu's poem:

My Love

"I charge you
O ye daughters of Jerusalem
by the roes and by the hinds of the field
that ye stir not up nor awake my love
till he please..."

On the third day
O ye daughters of Jerusalem
early morning
I had to bind tightly my voice
and take the precautions against the burst of soft substance

There is no greater malice
than beauty
On the sixth day
my love
at last did to his heart desire

On the sixth day
my love
clipped off his finger nails
all other bad habits continued
my love
his finger nails
sharp and abhorrent
became the signifiers of our six days love.²⁷

²⁷ XIA YU: Memoranda, pp. 36–38.

Parodia sacra would probably be the appropriate term for this kind of poetic discourse, if this poem was the product of the Middle Ages. If we follow the researches of the German scholar Paul Lehmann *Die Parodie in Mittelalter* of 1922, we find that in the compendium entitled *Monumenta Germaniae* there is a story *Cena Cypriani* about a certain King Johel who wanted to recreate the famous wedding feast at Cana of Galilee. In it Adam seated at the centre, Eve on an enormous fig-leaf, Cain on a plough, Abel on a milk pail, Noah got drunk and King David played on his harp. Even Pontius Pilate brought there water for the guests to wash their hands and Jesus Christ a lamb as a gift. At the end Agar, concubine of Abraham, was killed for the redemption of all.²⁸ The works of this genre should have comical effects and the Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin remarked that the whole *Bible* including *The Four Gospels*: “as it were cut up into little scraps, and these scraps were arranged in such a way that a picture emerged of a grand feast at which all the personages of sacred history from Adam and Eve to Christ and his Apostles eat, drink and make merry. In this work a correspondence of all details to Sacred Writ is transformed into carnival, or more correctly into Saturnalia.”²⁹

Nothing of this sort would be acceptable for postmodern and feminist Xia Yu. She is not interested in comic imitation, she does not want to make absurd the original, to produce laughter, and if she does, then only the bitter smile of despair. Xia Yu demythologizes the text of the “holy of holies”, desacralizes the songs which hundreds and thousands of years before the *Song of Songs* were common property of Egypt and Mesopotamia. We have to realize that as in many other books of the *Bible*, the old Hebrews also by creating the *Song of Songs* followed to some extent the great literary works of their Near Eastern predecessors and models. Certainly that this should be regarded as the product of Hebrew genius, but without some earlier works would never reach such a high degree of literary and philosophico-ethical perfection. As a student of interliterary process I dare to judge the extent of value of the works as Michael V. Fox’s *The Song of Songs and Ancient Egyptian Love Poetry*³⁰ or the recent work by Gwendolyn Leick entitled *Sex and Eroticism in Mesopotamian Literature*³¹ for the *Song of Songs*, although in the last mentioned, the problems concerned with the jewel of the Hebrew love literature were not in the focus of attention. The poetic treatment of goddesses as Inanna, Ishtar, or Hathor is similar to that of Shulamite, or Dumuzi or Tammuz to that of Solomon or the unnamed shepherd in the *Song of Songs*. There are, of course, differences. The authors (or the editors) of the *Song of Songs* were less sexually liberal than their older Egyptian, Sumerian, Babylonian and other models.

²⁸ See the exposition in ROSE, M.A.: *Parody, Ancient, Modern and Post-Modern*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 148.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁰ Madison, The University of Wisconsin Press 1985, esp. pp. 269–280 and 283–286.

³¹ London and New York, Routledge 1994, pp. 69, 72 and 238.

From three sequences quoted above, two begin with the image of a girl embraced by a boy sitting or lying and preparing for the declaration of love of some kind proper for the heterosexual love or for sleep. If in the first of these sequences, the description of the beautiful shepherd in the wonderful natural surroundings took place and in the second another one followed depicting King Solomon's wedding day, his bed "paved with love", and in the last, impressive and most deep similes concerning the axiological equality of love and death, jealousy and grave are presented, for Xia Yu, consumation of love is nothing more than nausea connected with the lover's ejaculation. Love between girl and boy, man and woman at the end of the second millennium A.D., could not be looked at with the same eyes and delineated with the same devices as during the last two millennia B.C. Sharp and abhorrent finger nails, the bursts of soft substance as *partes pro toto* of the man, "canned fishes submerged in tomato souce"³² as a parable of love between man and woman, or "empty (and aching) hole"³³ after the extraction of a teeth, as metaphor for love in the poem of the same title, i.e. *Aiqing* [52] Love, and many other examples for Xia Yu's poetry, are proofs of her search for the phenomena she herself called "profanities".³⁴ She mentioned in her interview that "she will devote herself to an investigation of female profanities" and she is probably doing it. But in her poetry mostly male profanities predominate. It would probably be better for her poetry if more equilibrium, regarding this matter, could be achieved. Even if we give the greatest plausible space for the justified feminist demands and creative freedom, we may also say a few words asking for more justice for the opposite sex or gender.³⁵

3

Siren (1951–), whose real name is Xie Shude [54] published only one volume of poetry so far, and she is probably the deepest among all Taiwanese poetesses. Immediately after publishing of the book entitled *Qiangwei huashi* [16] The Rose Chronicles, five poems in translation John Balcom appeared in the prestigious journal *The Chinese PEN*, 4, 1995 and for Siren it was an honour that Professor Yu Guangzhong (1928–), a *maestro* of modern Taiwanese poets,³⁶

³² XIA YU: *Yu guantou* [51] *A Can of Fish* In: Memoranda, p. 150. English translation see in: YEH, M.: *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*. New Haven and London, Yale University Press 1992, pp. 227–228.

³³ XIA YU: Memoranda, pp. 22–23.

³⁴ YEH, M.: *The Feminist Poetic of Xia Yu*, p. 33.

³⁵ Very good example of this kind of poetry is her *Kaoguxue* [53] *Archeology*, Memoranda, pp. 90–93. Its English translation see in YEH, M.: *Anthology of Modern Chinese Poetry*, pp. 223–224.

³⁶ Professor Qi Bangyuan (Pang-yuan Chi) [55], who wrote *Editor's Note* to this issue, pointed out that Siren is "a most talented woman poet" and she highlighted her also during our meeting on January 3, 1996.

wrote a long preface to her volume.³⁷ From it we may guess that she was a Buddhist who converted to Christianity. Her first poem *Danding* [56] *Dante* was published in 1973. Dante, probably the greatest religious poet of the Western world, was her first literary love among the Christian poets. If we look after her poems with biblical themes, then we see that more weighty religious and ethical questions began to interest her in the year 1985 and later.

Siren is similar to Rongzi in looking at the *Bible* as the source of meditation and prayer. At the end of her poem *Wandao* [57] *Evening Prayer* from the year 1985 we read:

Goodness and evil did not part their way up to this time.
Except of the truth in my heart, bittered and shrunk
in darkness, I perceive (*ganzhi*) [58] you,
O God, terrible existence crushes me³⁸

One of the contributors to the volume *The Problem of Evil*, Terence Penelhum in the essay entitled *Divine Goodness and the Problem of Evil* wrote the following sentence just at the beginning: “The purpose of this paper is not to offer any solution to the problem of evil, or to declare it insoluble.” Hence, it may probably be soluble, but the Christian theologians do not know exactly how. And in summing up, the author asserted that theist is pressed to acknowledge that any evils in the world “be allowed by God because their presence is at least compatible with futherance of those ends which classes the evils *as* evils, as being supremely good.”³⁹

Goodness and evil will never part in this world. *The Book of Job*, probably the deepest from the philosophical point of view in the whole *Bible*, is about evil and scepticism. Heinrich Heine called it “das Hohelied der Skepsis”⁴⁰ (Song of Song of scepticism) in the year 1844, a few months before Friedrich Nietzsche was born.

Siren did not understand the personality of Job and the whole book in this way. She certainly did not pay attention to the sceptical aspects of *The Book of Job*. During her reading of it, she was interested mainly in the character of Job and in the portrait of the *poematis personae* which is probably mirroring of Siren herself, she tried to show mainly her sorrows on the background of Job’s suffering. In her poem *Du Yebo ji* [59] *Notes After Reading the Book of Job* from the year 1986, the following lines are most important:

³⁷ See Note 4.

³⁸ SIREN: *The Rose Chronicles*, p. 192.

³⁹ In: ADAMS, M.M. and ADAMS, R.M. (eds): *The Problem of Evil*. Don Mills (ON), Oxford University Press Canada, pp. 69 and 81.

⁴⁰ DELL, K.J.: *The Book of Job as Sceptical Literature*. Berlin, New York, Walter de Gruyter 1991, p. 4. Originally taken from ELLERMEIER, F.: *Randbemerkung zur Kunst des Zitierens: Welches Buch nannte Heinrich Heine “das Hohelied der Skepsis”?*. *Zeitschrift für alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, 77 (neue Folge), 36, 1965, pp. 93–94.

My roots grow to the edge of water,
dew moistens my brains all night long.
Drop after drop dripping on my heart,
there is no other way
God's wisdom still descends
The one who loves me most, but who tortures me most
Only wishes my heart will survive this ordeal to the end⁴¹

Siren starts out of the premise that “God is Love”, which is Christian understanding of God and had its origin in St. John’s teaching.⁴² We may find the proofs of God’s love in the *Old Testament* as well, but never of this kind. God in *The Book of Job* is not a loving but a testing God, and Job in one verse even asserts: “He teareth *me* in his wrath, who hateth me, who gnasheth upon me with his teeth...” (16, 10). Job’s “God is arbitrary”,⁴³ according to Katherine J. Dell, since “he destroyeth the perfect and the wicked” (9, 22). Innocent Job (cf. “Thou knowest that I am not wicked” 10, 7), is obliged to say on the address of his Creator: “Thou huntest me as a fierce lion”, but at the same time to express his wonder “and again thou shewest thyself marvellous upon me” (10, 6). In these words a manifestation of most deep love could hardly be seen, but a certain irony.⁴⁴ Although Job loved God and believed in him, he was tortured nearly to death and hoped the death would be his delivery. But Job was also a rebel: “Though he slays me, yet will I trust in him: but I will maintain mine own ways before him” (13, 15). Job needed vindication, but it was difficult: God is the highest judge: “Neither is there any daysman (i.e. umpire) betwixt us, that might lay his hand upon us both” (9, 33). There is a speech of God from the whirlwind in Chapters 38–42. Here, as remarked very briefly by M.H. Pope “no explanation is given of Job’s suffering”, i.e. no God’s view concerned with the arbitrary suffering as a mode of physical evil for no committed sins (ethical evil). More extensive remark: “Yahweh’s evasion of the question of Job’s innocence may be the poet’s oblique way of saying that no answer is available to man. God cannot be hauled into court or compelled to testify against himself. Ignorant and impotent man cannot presume to tell God how to order universe. No amount or degree of suffering could give a mere man, with his finite intelligence, licence to question God’s justice as Job has done.” And lastly: “Job gets no apology and no explanation from God for having wrongly afflicted him, but an absence of any charge of guilt is a tantamount to vindication.”⁴⁵ If Job has not sinned, why

⁴¹ Cf. SIREN: *The Rose Chronicles*, pp. 189–190 and John BALCOM’s translation in *The Chinese PEN*, 4, 1995, pp. 15–16.

⁴² *St. John*, 4, 8.

⁴³ DELL, K.J.: op. cit., p. 174.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁴⁵ POPE, M.H.: *Book of Job*. In: *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 45.

was he so tortured? Is love, the greatest possible love, compatible with most horrible tortures both of a physical and a spiritual nature?

In another her poem *Yage* [60] *The Song of Songs* from the year 1987, Siren goes more further. She is questioning herself and God about His ways to human-kind.

I sleep, but my heart waketh,
it is the voice of my beloved, hear it, hear it.
My head is filled with dew,
look at my locks moistened with the drops of night.
How beautiful, exciting love, full of tantalizing torment it is!
I charge you, O ye daughters of Jerusalem,
I love Job afflicted with loathsome sores
and scraping them with potsherd.
St. Teresa de Ávila suffers from mad paralysis.
God has handed His most beloved saints to Satan.
Why? Why then?
Greatness lies just in this mystery.⁴⁶

Siren is a doubter or sceptic only for a while. Later in the poem she repeats the opinion from the *Genesis* that “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, *it was very good*” (1, 31). After she kisses the hands of the crucified Jesus, in the rainy night of early spring she hears the hymn *Gloria in excelsis*.

Here Siren connects in few lines of her poem more than two millenia of the history of love and pain, of good and evil in our Judeo-Christian civilization. Her *poematis persona* strives after the love and torment of mythopoeic Shulamite and her King Solomon or the unnamed shepherd, although Siren’s own lot seems to be that of afflicted Job with his terrible physical wounds and spiritual suffering. The crucified Son of God is a paradigm. Satan, in the times of writing of *The Book of Job* and earlier, God’s adversary, but also a member of his heavenly *suite*, became later, starting with the *New Testament*, God’s arch-enemy, and humankind received him as a part of its life. Christ has seen falling him as lightning from heaven (*St. Luke, 10, 18*).

All those who know well *Song of Songs* see at first glance that the first lines in the quoted passage are a full or adequate quotations of 5, 2 and that one about the “daughters of Jerusalem” we mentioned already above. Siren is very fond of literary pastiche and heavy allusiveness as has been pointed out by Yu Guangzhong.⁴⁷ The objects of her poetry via quotation or partial creative imitation are not only biblical subjects but also Chinese and foreign classical works. E.g. in the first line of the poem *Hanye yin* [61] *Cold Nights Song* from the year 1990, she mentions that she read the whole winter *The Inferno* from Dante’s *The*

⁴⁶ SIREN: *The Rose Chronicles*, pp. 193–194.

⁴⁷ YU GUANGZHONG: *op. cit.*, p. 25.

Divine Comedy, but in the second she nearly word after word quotes the first two and half lines from it: “Midway in our life’s journey, I went astray/from the straight road and woke myself/alone in a dark wood”,⁴⁸ which in her rendering reads as follows: “Midway in my life’s journey, I missed the right way and became very sad”,⁴⁹ of course, without indicating the source. The same could be said about the beginning of the fourth line which is the first line of the poem *Yue chu* [62] *Moon Arises* from *Shijing* [63] *Book of Songs*, i.e. “The moon comes forth in her brightness”,⁵⁰ allegedly a bit sensual and not fully in accordance with the demands of the ethically strict Confucianist criticism. But is the moon anywhere brighter than during the cool winter nights in Venice? Another quotation comes from Marcel Proust who visited this city more than once, loved to sit down and eat the honeycombed ice called *granita* at the Caffè Florian, the oldest and most expensive café in the Piazza San Marco.⁵¹

Siren used the imagery of the *Song of Songs* once again in the long poem entitled *A Mading* [64] To Marcin Karolak from the year 1991, dedicated to a young Polish boy.⁵² Here she depicted a story of her platonic love in Cambridge, England. This time Chinese “Shulamite” falls in love not with Job scraping his itching and aching ulcers, but with a handsome youth with eyes of a dove. She tries to evoke the atmosphere of the Chapter 2 and mentions “lily among thorns” (2, 2) and the “apple tree among the trees of the wood” (2, 3). Just like Shulamite, she is also “sick of love” (2, 5), but asks her friend not to look at her for the reasons we may only guess or imagine. At the end she does not curse or blame him when she had to taste the bitterness of last and definite parting.

*

Three prominent Taiwanese poetesses understood three wisdom books of the *Bible* in three different ways. This was connected with their upbringing, ideological background and their poetic nature. Whereas Rongzi followed orthodox Christian interpretation, Xia Yu parodied the mythopoeic understanding of love and the whole poetic context. According to my view, Siren went further than the other two. She questioned at least goodness and evil, love and suffering, God, Satan and human beings in the terrible existence of our world.

Is Siren one of the possible Chinese translations of Pontius Pilate words: *Ecce homo* (*St. John*, 19, 5)?

⁴⁸ Cf. The Rose Chronicles, p. 195 and YU GUANGZHONG: op. cit., p. 25.

⁴⁹ *The Divine Comedy*. Trans. by John CIARDI, New York–London, W.W. Norton & Comp. 1990 (quoted according to authorized Taiwan Reprint Bookman Books Ltd 1991), p. 3.

⁵⁰ LEGGE, J. *The Chinese Classics*. Vol. . Taipei reprint 1969, p. 212.

⁵¹ Cf. The Rose Chronicles, p. 197, YU GUANGZHONG: op. cit., p. 24 and HIBBERT, Chr.: *Venice. The Biography of a City*. London, Grafton Books 1990, p. 285.

⁵² The Rose Chronicles, pp. 199–203.

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3. 廣播學院出版社 4. 冰心 5. 蓉子 6. 斯人 7. 周伯乃
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